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UNWARRANTED PUSH FOR SECRECY

The Missouri Senate seems determined to make a bad bill even worse. The House should stop this when it gets the chance. The bill in question, sponsored by Democratic Sen. Harold Caskey of Butler, would empower local law enforcement officials to eavesdrop on telephone conversations of suspected drug dealers. It is bad*legislation*because it could easily be abused by local authorities, who may be careless about constitutional protection of individual *privacy*rights and because it has not been shown to be needed.

But if Sen. John Scott, a St. Louis Democrat, gets his way, the same authorities who could wiretap could also block the public from access to a variety of police records. As he did last year in an equally misguided effort, Sen. Scott wants to close records in a way that he says would protect witnesses. Exploiting the drug hysteria that has seized control in Jefferson City, Mr. Scott has proposed an amendment prohibiting police disclosure of drug arrest information "only to the extent that disclosure of such records and reports would disclose the identity of a confidential source, or endanger the life or physical safety of any individual." But in practice, the bill would be used as an excuse to close records virtually all the time.

Interestingly, Mr. Scott has not cited any instance when the media disclosed police information that endangered witnesses. This raises the question whether he is primarily interested in protecting witnesses or punishing the press. In any case, police already have the means to keep sensitive information confidential. Mr. Scott's amendment would simply make it easier for them to conceal information about politicians or other well-connected individuals.

The amendment was approved Monday night without discussion but must be approved again before going to the House. Senators should reconsider the invitation to abuse that they are courting with this amendment - and the bill - and reject both.

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